


# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

## THE YOUNG MAN



BY

◇ OZORA S. DAVIS ◇



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## THE YOUNG MAN



An Address delivered in the South Congregational  
Church, New Britain, and before the Lincoln  
Club in Berlin, Conn., February 11, 1906,

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With the writer's sincere regard,

George S. Davis

22nd November  
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## ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE YOUNG MAN.

"Now there was a son of Benjamin whose name was Kish, and he had a son whose name was Saul, a choice young man and a goodly; from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people."

I Samuel 9:1-2 (parts)

The grave peril which threatens us in our admiration of the heroic characters of the Old Testament is the tendency that we have to think that the living God worked and spoke so uniquely through these men that He has never revealed His will and purpose through other modern men, equally noble and equally the agents of God's will.

To-day I propose that we turn to another and modern Saul the son of Kish, stalwart, tall, goodly and chosen, to see what his life and character has to inspire and furnish as for our common life.

I shall speak, therefore, of Abraham Lincoln, the young man. My purpose is simply to outline the permanent characteristics of the great American as they had become fixed, let us say, by the time he had reached the age of twenty-six. None of his powers was fully developed, for the great critical tests had not come; he had become neither a national nor a world figure, as he became later. The man himself, however, prophetic of what was to be in the future, was already outlined. This outline we shall consider together now.

Let me speak a word first of all concerning the social group from which the young Lincoln came. So much is said concerning the one-room cabin in which he was born, the hard work and poverty that accompanied his boyhood, that the notion seems to prevail that Lincoln's boyhood surroundings were all quite against him. Instead of this, I believe that there lay in the environment of the boy in Indiana and Illinois during those pioneer days the very forces which were most helpful and hopeful toward the formation of a resolute, self-reliant and ambitious character.

We much misunderstand the real conditions in which the lower middle class live. There is hard work, self-denial, and poverty among them; but it is true of this class more than of any other in the country that ambition and hope and progress mark their lives and make them beautiful in spite of their limitations. The lowest ranks of society are sodden with sin and devoid of hope; the so-called highest classes are often debauched with vice and made languid from excessive stimulus of pleasure. The hope of the future and the glory of our civilization lies with the lower middle class whose powers are expanding, whose ambitions are tingling with yearning and appreciation, and who endure without one word of complaint the limitations of their present lot because they know that they possess within themselves the power to transcend those conditions and create a new world for themselves. I do not mean that it is more desirable to be born into such

an environment than it is to inherit the gifts and culture which make, for example, a Lowell or Emerson; but in general it is to be counted a privilege by any boy or girl that the conditions of their early life call for struggle and sacrifice. Lincoln's boyhood was full of healthy joy and confident hope. He never speaks of it as gloomy or too hard to be borne. He accepted life as just the thing to try the strength of his soul upon, and to bring forth the man. Above all things he would have scorned receiving pity and compassion for his early lot.

The young men of to-day may be divided into two classes; those whose problem is how to succeed in spite of the obstacles in their way, and those whose problem is how to succeed and be strong in spite of the fact that they have no resisting obstacles to cultivate their moral muscle and endurance. The latter class faces the greater difficulty. Lincoln belonged to that sturdy stock of the resolute, ambitious, hopeful poor, whose physical vigor is not weakened by luxury or excess, and whose movement is upward by the rough road of poverty and much denial to the point where they fill the places of the rich whose wealth has been the cause of their own destruction. Had he been a millionaire's son in New York, young Lincoln might have ended as a wit and debauchee.

The first point which I wish to make emphatic concerning Lincoln is the superb quality of his

idealism. — The conditions surrounding him in boyhood and young manhood proved to be the atmosphere in which his ambitions were awakened and his ideals born. This young fellow, 'keeping a blaze of shavings burning in the open fire-place so that he could have enough light by which to read, is one of the noblest examples that history records of the ideal mastering a young man until the fire burning in the fire-place of the cooper's shop was only a faint symbol of the fire burning within his own breast. He was in love with something beyond his lot and place. He had not surrendered to that pernicious, deadly policy of being content with present duty, or even of passing from one duty to another as easily and as comfortably as possible.

He fell in love with learning; he gave himself with passion to the cause of freedom; as he once gave a sound thrashing to a brute of a man who swore in the presence of women in his country store, so later he dared to undertake gigantic enterprises in the championship of truth against error and of freedom against all tyranny that fettered it, because of his loyalty to the ideal.

Thus ever before him burned the pillar of fire and of cloud, leading him into the desert marchings and forward to cleave unknown dangers, because he dared to discover and to follow the ideal.

Oh, young men, attend to the ideal! The very ultimate worth of your being is registered by your

aspirations and your deepest yearnings. Somewhere there is a cause to be championed. You do not need to seek it out; it will come to you. In that high hour when the cause that is worthy and the work that claims your service comes to your door, you will not be ready unless you have kept fast and vigil with the ideal of your own nobler selfhood and your own vaster work.

The pressure of the many duties and the thronging pleasures of your day tends to crowd to a place of neglect the ideal. Be careful. There is one great thing to be done; it is to keep personal life high and clean and the soul open to God. This young man did that, and God wrought through him one of the holiest ransoms that the history of the human spirit registers. The ideal fire burned; the vision led him; he followed the gleam.

The next large line which I wish to draw in this sketch portrays the extraordinary humanity of this young man. He was a superb human being considered physically. His royal humanity never is displayed, however, until we see the wider range of his interests and sympathies and concern. Mankind was his business. He shut the doors against no appeal of any human want. He was at home at the minister's and called his wife affectionately "Aunt Polly." Boys would lug his chair for him by the hour when he was a surveyor out of pure love of being near him. His famous log, where he sat during noon hours to tell stories, was polished

smooth. Every interest, every sorrow, every joy of the people was dear to him. You read about Jack Armstrong and his wrestling matches, the Clary's Grove gang and their loyalty to him, the school-master, the lawyers, the books and the stories, and you are aware that here you are in the presence of a real world where men and women are the great centers of interest. There is small space given to conventionalities and fashion; it is a world of sincere, hearty human aspiration and activity, and Lincoln is the most real and human center of it all.

Our modern life needs this very assertion of human heartiness and interest which Lincoln displayed as a young man. Young men with rich, red blood in their veins, who love life and work hard and dare sometimes to let the mist cloud their eyes when the sorrow of the world smites them as well as to laugh heartily when the joy of life sweeps over them, such young men are needed to assert again the human soul's supreme interest and worth above all the conventionality and fashion of an age. You are men and nothing of human concern can be foreign to you.

Undoubtedly one of the first impressions that ever comes to any one who thinks over the characteristics of Lincoln, is his sense of humor. The secret of his popularity in the early days, before the nobler and stronger traits of his heart and mind had been disclosed, was his rare gift as the teller of stories, and the discoverer of the humorous side of

common life. Unfortunately too much has been said concerning Lincoln's stories, so that he is sometimes regarded as a mere genius at the sessions of the daily gathering of men at the grocery store, rather than the man whose humor was rich and fine. There was, without question, in some of his stories an element of coarseness so far as their material is concerned. The witness of those who heard him, however, is that when he told them, that fact disappeared. His stories were finely told. It is, however, concerning the deeper quality of his humor that I wish to speak. For this was a saving element in his nature. Woe to the man who must walk through the world and never see its incongruity, or have his mirth provoked by the humorous in common life. We need the ability to discover the false and absurd proportions in the life around us and sometimes too the power to laugh a cause out of court when it cannot be convicted. Humor when it is true is neither coarse, cruel nor vindictive. If ever it descends to these levels it is falsified in its deepest reach and becomes spite or cynicism.

Lincoln presents nobly the figure of a young man who had the rare gift, which he had rarely cultivated, of discovering the inconsistencies and the contradictions of the life about him and then presenting them with telling force in the form of anecdote or story, and using the keen blade of his humor in court or on the stump.

His example bids us keep our eyes wide open to the humorous in common life and to use the weapon well when the time comes.

The more one reads of Lincoln's early life, the more striking becomes his passion for clearness. It really amounted to a passion with him. He says himself that nothing ever made him so angry as not being able to understand what people meant by what they said. After hearing the neighbors talk in his father's cabin, he would go to bed or walk up or down, trying sometimes for hours to restate clearly what had been said obscurely and to work over the meaning of the talk, which was chiefly political, until he had mastered it, and made it perfectly plain. The more I study his life and the more I think over the characteristics of the present day, the more I am convinced that one of our chief modern sins is lack of clearness, and that we need mightily to-day the clearness of Abraham Lincoln. Young people, especially young men, are doing too little clear, resolute, thorough thinking. We accept the traditional view, and we do the customary thing without thinking out for ourselves the reason of our action. Mental, moral and spiritual fog lies over large areas of the landscape with every one of us. When Abraham Lincoln spoke the people knew what he meant. He spoke clearly because he had done his own thinking and had done it thoroughly. He did not accept opinions or forms of expression simply because they bore the

hall-mark of approval by the politicians of the day. Clever repetition of the speech of other men was not his task. It is no easy task to think out a fundamental truth to its widest implications. Many young men are too lazy to think. Like the South American chief, "great ideas make them very sleepy." We need young men who are resolute enough to think life through and come to clear, definite conclusions about it. Abraham Lincoln did this.

Again let me sketch in the line of Lincoln's rugged, uncompromising honesty. His store in the country village was a financial failure. That was no fault of his. He had not found his sphere of most profitable activity. The failure was caused by no sharp or dishonest practice of his. A debt of eleven hundred dollars was thrown upon his shoulders, a burden which seemed to be insurmountable. Under these circumstances it was the custom for men to "clear out," in the language of the time. Lincoln did not clear out. Going to his creditors he told them that if they would let him alone he would pay them what he owed as fast as he could do it. It took fifteen years for him to keep his promise; but he did it. At last every note, with the interest at high rates, had been paid and he was able to stand up in the face of every man knowing that the obligations were met with honor.

It was not easy. Lincoln commonly spoke of this as "the national debt." He was not afraid of hard work, however, so much as he was afraid of dishonor. He did not "clear out" because he knew that it was folly to try that futile way of escaping the demands of the moral law. He paid his debts because honor is the law of all manly living and he was no coward in the presence of hard work. His example bids every one of us be true to the demand of personal integrity in business life.

Another trait of Lincoln which the young manhood of today needs to understand and to imitate, is his keen sense of moral wrong, and his terrific determination to bear his part in setting it right. You are all familiar with the story of his visit to the slave-market in New Orleans.

"In New Orleans for the first time, Lincoln beheld the true horrors of human slavery. He saw negroes in chains—whipped and scourged. Against this inhumanity his sense of right and justice rebelled, and his mind and conscience were awakened to a realization of what he had often heard and read. No doubt, as one of his companions has said, 'slavery ran the iron into him then and there.' One morning in their rambles over the city the trio passed a slave auction. A vigorous and comely mulatto girl was being sold. She underwent a thorough examination at the hands of the bidders: they pinched her flesh, and made her trot up and

down the room like a horse, to show how she moved and in order, as the auctioneer said, that 'bidders might satisfy themselves whether the article they were offering to buy was sound or not.' The whole thing was so revolting that Lincoln moved away from the scene with a deep feeling of 'unconquerable hate.' Bidding his companions follow him, he said: 'Boys let's get away from this.' If ever I get a chance to hit that thing, (meaning slavery) I'll hit it hard."

(Miss Tarbell's "Lincoln," Vol. 1.)

Here we strike at the very heart of Lincoln's message to the young men of this generation. He did not belong to that class of indifferent and blase young manhood which looks squarely into the face of debauchery and immoral life and says with a snap of the finger, "what concern is this of mine?" It has come to pass that the sins and shames of life to-day fall without much appeal upon the moral sensitiveness of young men. One of the most appalling facts which we meet is the moral indifference of those who should be responsible for the highest life of the city and state. The very persons who should be the guardians of the Commonwealth blink at the things which make for the common debauchery and distress. To Abraham Lincoln the New Orleans slave market meant a direct challenge to him, the young Illinois pioneer. And he answered it. He answered it as only a young man can answer, when he is true to the noblest im-

pulses of his being, the thing which calls for his noble and most sacrificial service. If every incident were lost from the life of the young store-keeper, and this alone preserved, we could sum up the nobleness of his nature, and the genius of his character from his resolution made there in the New Orleans slave market to "hit that thing hard if he ever had the chance." God almighty gave him the chance because He knew He could trust His man. God never gives a man a chance when He knows He cannot trust the man to do his duty.

The reason why that tall, mighty man was given the privilege of signing the Emancipation Proclamation was because he did not avert his eyes, or skulk from duty when he faced the shame of the slave market, and knew that it meant something for him to do.

Give me a few words in conclusion to speak of Lincoln's religion. His was one of those elemental faiths, so deep, so strong, so simple and so natural that it is hard to classify it under any current names. Thank God there are some things too big too be named and some aspirations too holy to be condensed into formulas or packed into statistics. Lincoln's religion was one of these.

You remember those words with which he closed his little talk to his friends before he left Springfield for Washington to assume the Presidency. It is one of the most holy episodes in his history.

"I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farwell."

(Miss Tarbell's "Lincoln, Vol.I, p. 410.)

The people were sobbing as he closed his words. Those who were present and stood in the rain while he spoke never forgot the scene.

The politicians sneered outwardly, but the plain people were touched to the heart. Here, they said, is a man who believed in God and dared to ask the prayers of good men and to confess that he prayed.

Oh, young men, what about your religion? I am not asking just now about certain external things. ceremonies, confessions of faith,—but what about your religion? Do you believe in God; are you relying upon God; do you pray; are you anxious that good men should pray for you?

Here was a man who did these things and dared to be genuine enough to declare it among

those who knew him best, his townspeople and own familiar friends.

Forget all else about him if necessary, but never forget him, standing among his fellows at Springfield, facing an unknown future, and declaring his personal trust in God and beseeching the prayers of men on his behalf.

There he is noblest of all.



